

Parents plant the seeds of child's education

St. John Bosco once quipped: "Nothing is more characteristic of youth than its tendency to changeableness." (*Life of Dominic Savio*, Chapter 7). Though our principles are constant, our children are not.

In this column – and the next one to be published next week – I propose to name "sites" where those changes occur. The three figurative places through which they travel from kindergarten to junior high to college, I'll call the Garden, the Desk, and the Village.

These represent the three stages of their education and within which I'd like to describe what goods your child ought to seek. There is, of course, overlap between each stage; but for parents and teachers it can be helpful to have in hand a kind of map of the terrain, as we shepherd our children during these exciting, exhausting, and enchanting years between zero and 20.

We begin in the "Garden". The garden represents the place best suited to a child during their first 10 years of life, more or less. The two powers awaiting cultivation at this phase are a child's physical senses and his moral prejudices. The senses is where all knowledge originates, says St. Thomas.

By this he did not propose that we can only know material things, such as the weight of rocks or the colour of trees; he meant, rather, that learning for us men and women always starts humbly, with our toes in the sandbox.

God could've filled the world with only angels or apes, but instead he wanted us human beings to rule, creatures both of spirit and of matter. In the course of a child's education, then, the body comes first. Irrespective of what summits of insight the mind may later climb, each of us takes our first step upon the long ladder of learning with our feet firmly planted upon the ground.

For this reason, the ancients thought early education revolved best around music and gymnastics. You must take care of first things first. Sport was prized because it stiffened muscles and the will even as it helped a child coordinate brain and limb.

Then there is music. For the ancients "musike" included both music and the beautiful recitation of words, that is, poetry. So alongside sport and play and musical formation, in our garden we should also include good books and nursery stories, and songs with silly sounds, as from Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*:

"Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.”

What the mad mathematician meant hardly matters. As parents of young children know, it is the sounds of words that first attract, much more than their sense; volume, pitch, and emotion speak louder than terms, propositions, and syllogisms.

During these years imitation is the chief means of mastery rather than understanding. Anyone who has watched young children play knows how naturally they imitate. In our family, as a supplement to books and plays and songs, our older children watch about two movies per year. We don't need any more. One sitting of *Ben Hur* translates into 100 hours of intense and violent chariot racing. Two clips from *Mr. Bean*, a few summers back, set off two years of contorted facial expressions.

The question is not whether children will imitate, but what images we will set before them. What stories do we wish them to hear? Those that will help them to imitate what is *good*. Of course the Bible should provide a regular fare, such as a weekly reading Sunday nights. But so also would we want nursery rhymes, Aesop's fables, Beatrix Potter, L.M. Montgomery, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and later, Plutarch's *Lives*, *The Hobbit* and others like these.

Many of us have heard about the "Great Books" movement. The American professor John Senior a generation ago coined a term for the lesser, though in a way more valuable, books for youth. These he called the "Good Books." Like rubies, their lesser brilliance prepares the eye for the brighter light that refracts through the diamonds of the "Great Books". Plato's *Republic*, for instance, is arguably the greatest book ever written about education, but how much better will you be prepared for its lessons after you've studied the tortured psychology of Toad in *Wind in the Willows* and lived long with all Christopher Robin's friends in *Winnie the Pooh*.

In the Garden we train our children's senses through sport and literature. I mentioned also "prejudices". I choose that word deliberately. Prejudices can be harmful. Prejudices can be misleading. What prejudices cannot be is wished away. They have their own sacred use. A good educator must find out what that is. A prejudice is, literally, a judgment made prior to a direct encounter with a "thing"; and children, if they are to survive into adulthood, must have heads filled with such judgments.

Those who cannot learn from others will be doomed to learn everything by themselves: your finger wedged in your front door; your hands carrying back to the table bits of grandma's smashed china; your bicycle stretched across a Ford F-150's grille; these and a hundred other evils lie in wait for the child who

has not learned to be prejudiced.

The need for sound prejudices extends far past the Garden. The mother who says to her daughter about "religion" or "dating" that she wishes her simply to make her own choices, is rather like a captain who would send his regiment into battle without weapons or map.

This second aspect of early education, like the first, holds for its object the supplying of surrogate experiences of good and evil. Instruction can help, but literature insinuates better; a good story, like *Treasure Island*, can implant a loathing for pirates, even if you grow up on the Prairies; a good story, like *Farmer Boy*, can implant a love for hard work, even if you grow up in a city.

More important than books to your own children, though, will be your own example, and the example of their other teachers. At this stage, imitation comes naturally and of necessity. For their image of the good, for what to fear, for what to love, and for what to hate, they will snoop around in picture books, and feel the motions of song, but it is at the canvass of your life that they will stare.

Wait a moment; should all these passions be cultivated? How about the last in that list, hatred? Does this passion deserve cultivation in our Garden? Hatred I define here as anger directed toward an ignoble object. Scripture does not say, "never be angry," but rather "let not the sun go down" upon your anger. A child must respectfully fear being hit by a bus, but he must determinedly hate falling into sin.

Habituating well this passion means acknowledging that not all is well inside and that for every yes there must also be a no. In other words, virtuous, godly anger requires renunciation. In a psychologized culture this may sound harsh. But the consequences are worse.

Just a few days ago a couple told me and my wife about an encounter on a city bus. A mother was riding with her child of, I think, four years old. The bus was full, but with enough room for the youngster to scamper up and down the aisle visiting the other passengers along the way. Except, as this child roamed from rider to rider, he swung his foot against each person's shins.

The game continued for some time before one of the victims turned to the mother in exasperation to ask whether she did not see what her little sinner was doing and whether she might not put an end to the impromptu soccer practice. To which question this mother answered that she wanted to raise her child in a "stress-free" environment.

The bus rumbled along, I imagine, in an awkward silence. A shuffle, and then a teenager pulled on the high little string beckoning the driver to let him off. That teenager had a wad of gum in his mouth. As the teen stood up from his seat he offloaded the wad onto his thumb, then swiftly planted the sweet rubber into the child's forehead, looking drolly over his shoulder at the indignant mother,

he announced that “my mother also raised me in a stress-free environment!” That’s a good teacher in the making!

To sum up: reasonable bedtimes, an orderly prayer life, common meals, consistent discipline all insinuate the life of grace to our children. These early lessons may be rejected later on, but at least we will have given them something substantial to deny.

Alas, so few young rebels these days bear such a privilege. Though the child’s work in the garden may look like mere play, we must tend to it well, to body and to soul, through precept and example, showing them what to hate and what to love; for before long that child will disappear and in his seat will be found the youth. We turn, in our next essay, to the Desk and to the Village.

This column is adapted from a talk originally given as the keynote address at an Aug. 10-11 conference on Catholic education in Saskatoon.

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